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ABSTRACT

Children's dependence upon the teacher in all aspects of the writing process in the elementary classroom must be replaced by the development of self-critical tools in the young writer. To help this development, the teacher should look at the nature of the writing process, with its three steps of precomposing, composing, and postcomposing, and then view the different composing styles (reactive and reflective) of children within that process. The focal point of the development is the writing conference, which may be held as often as every five or ten days, depending on the child. Children's dependency has been removed when, through individual conferences, they are able to discover strengths and weaknesses in their own communication and the writing process is in their own hands. (JM)

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LET'S GET RID OF THE WELFARE MESS IN THE TEACHING OF WRITING

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Let's Get Rid of the Welfare Mess in the Teaching of Writing

I don't like welfare. Peter wouldn't like it either...if he knew he were on welfare, writer's welfare. Each day Peter waits in line in his second grade classroom, to receive whatever praise may come his way on writing assignments about subjects that have been carefully chosen to stimulate him into "creativity." He writes for others, not for himself. He writes to communicate with one person, the teacher. He is dependent on the teacher for criticism, topic, writing time (always between 1:00 and 1:40 after lunch--when few professional writers can write). Opportunities for writing are carefully controlled and only come when the teacher makes writing assignments.

The writing welfare system makes children become dependent on the teacher in two ways. In the first, the teacher controls all phases of the writing process from the decision that children need to write to the final correction of their papers. In the second, children feel the pressure to make their voices correspond with the teacher's. That is, the authority and distance the child has in relation to his own writing is given over to the teacher. Eventually the only question remaining for children under these conditions is, "What do teachers want?"

Examination of teacher-made decisions throughout the writing process reveal the comprehensiveness of their control. Peter was dependent on his teacher's decision for:

(1) His need to write.

(2) When he would write.

(3) What he would write

(4) To whom he would write.

(5) How he would write.

(6) How the paper would be judged.

When dependency was fostered on the first four points it was not surprising that Peter cared little about the last two points, how he would write, or how the paper would be judged.

As teachers we are seldom aware of our involvement in the writing welfare system. There are many subtle turns in the road when we encourage thinking similar to our own, and discourage divergent thought, thus denying the child's own voice. When children evidence interest in "hot wheels" we gently steer writing to subjects with which we are more familiar. The welfare syndrome leads us to steer topics to our own interests when the lonely prospect of correcting sheafs of papers is on the horizon.

Dependency is not fostered by individual teachers alone. In the current emphasis on accountability teachers themselves lose their sense of authority and objectivity in instruction, their own teaching voices. The hierarchy of administrative involvement in "accountability missions" fosters suspicion leading from the federal government to the child in the classroom. A California teacher spoke of her teaching

situation in which children's writing was assessed by many levels of administration starting with the state department of education. In addition, her own superintendent of schools, feeling the brunt of public pressure for some data on the status of writing in the system, had asked for an objective panel review of composition. Her principal also wished to assess the status of spelling, capitalization, punctuation, and compare pupils in his building with national norms. Children from her room who were involved in the Title I writing project were given pre and post tests on writing skills. With all of the accountability pressure from above, the teacher in turn felt constrained to provide much higher grade placements in writing skills areas the following May. Under these circumstances many writing assignments were given with a strict accounting of all errors on each paper with the hope that there would be significant improvement in basic writing skills. Under these assessment circumstances instructional "short-cuts" are made leading to greater teacher control of the writing process and a stronger emphasis on the correspondence between pupil and teacher voice. Thus, development of the child's independence in the writing process voice, and the capacity for self-assessment are lost in the rush of expediency and the distrust of accountability.

If we look at writing from Peter's perspective, is it strange he believes that his writing, his language, or its evaluation is the property of those who control him? He has never been asked about his opinion or evaluation of his writing. He has never been asked about his interests, or the important events occurring in his life. It has

never occurred to the teacher that his insights about his own writing are information that can be used to help him learn to write. Peter is in the second grade but the teaching practices that ignore the development of self-critical skills in the writing process will continue throughout his entire educational career, even if he receives advanced university degrees.

How can we help children retain control of their language and develop their powers to evaluate what has been written? How can this be developed from the beginning, from the child's first attempts to write? How can a foundation of self-criticism be developed that will be consistent with effective writing at any age? These are some of the questions that will be addressed as we examine the process of developing self-critical tools in the young writer.

A frontal assault on developing the young child's capacity to be critical of his own writing is not in order. The teacher needs to step back and look at the nature of the writing process and then view the different composing styles of children within that process. Child behaviors in three phases of the writing process provide guidelines and limits on how far we can go in helping the child to be self-critical. The ignoring of these two areas by most educators may be one of the reasons so little progress has been made in placing the evaluation of writing where it belongs, with the writer.

Children's views of their own writing as well as how they actually went about writing was a major part of a study completed on the writing processes of seven year old children in 1973 (Graves). It becomes clear from the study data that if we are to be of help to

children we need to help them to be critical in each of three writing activities: precomposing, composing, and postcomposing. The definitions of these activities and some of the behaviors of interest to the teacher in each are the following:

(A) Precomposing. This phase immediately precedes writing. Children prepare for the act of composing through art work, discussion with other children and the teacher, reading, or in reflecting on events that have occurred in their lives.

(B) Composing. This phase begins and ends with the actual writing of the message. In this phase the observation of how children use language to accompany writing, reread, proofread, use resources, or react to outside interference are useful data to the teacher who would help a child to be self-critical.

(C) Postcomposing. This phase refers to all behaviors observed following the completion of writing the message. Examples of these behaviors are product disposition, solicitation of approval from others, proofreading and contemplation of the finished product.

Different composing styles need to be viewed at different points in the writing process. Two traits, reflectiveness and reactiveness, describe two general types of writers who emerged in the study of seven year olds. Each writing type demands a different approach to the development of self-critical powers. For example, reactive writers do not wish to reexamine finished products. For them, the actual doing, getting the message down in rough form, is everything. Teachers who wish to help reactive children to become more self-critical have a difficult task since self-criticism is a reflective act which involves

a return to something written. Reflective writers, on the other hand, enjoy the contemplation of their writing, the meaning of their message and the development of their characters.

Both writers, reactive and reflective, are better understood through a more complete review of their behavior types in different phases of the writing process. The behaviors exhibited during the process give a cue to the depth and type of questions the teacher asks during writing conferences with the child. The following are behaviors exhibited by each type of beginning writer during their involvement in the writing process.

	Reactive Writer	Reflective Writer
Precomposing	Rehearses before writing through drawing or some form of construction; uses sound effects and converses with other children.	Does not visibly rehearse before composing. Child may rehearse through reading, television, daydreaming, etc.
Composing	Uses overt language to accompany act of writing-the word is heard before it is written down. Ideas follow in couplet form--e.g., "He hit 'em; he hit 'em back." Characterizations are similar to those of the writer; they react and are interested primarily in doing. When asked what will be written next, this writer does not know beyond the next sentence.	Uses no overt language to accompany act of writing. Ideas are elaborative and show the beginnings of paragraph construction. Characterizations are similar to those of the writer; they reflect, show feelings. When asked what will be written next, this writer will respond with a complete message, usually close to what is subsequently written on the paper
Postcomposing	Puts work quickly away when the composing phase has been completed.	Occasionally studies the paper, rereads, or adjusts a phrase.

To further understand the needs of each type of writer, reactive and reflective, in developing self-critical skills, portions of interviews with each are reported. In each case the children were asked to rank papers in their writing folders from best to poorest and give a reason for selecting the best. Secondly, children were asked to tell what a "good writer needed to be able to do well in order to write well." Through each interview, the child's readiness for self-evaluation can be viewed.

The Reactive Child

Researcher: Would you look at these papers from your folder and choose the one you think is best, and the next best, . . . and then the next best?

Greg: (The child chose papers very rapidly with little apparent judgment being applied to the choice.)

Researcher: Why is this the best paper? (The child has chosen a paper about a hockey game. The paper had a picture of the hockey game at the top with the writing beneath.)

Greg: Like there is a fight. Like the goaldy. . . the hockey players and the referee.

Researcher: You seemed to choose this one because you liked the picture best.

Greg: (Nodded assent.)

Researcher: Why is this paper not as good as this one you thought was the best?

Greg: I goofed on the body.

In subsequent interviews, as well as in this one, the child's criteria for choosing the best paper were based on the drawing. For this child, the precomposing activity was much more interesting and important than the composing phase. Later on Greg volunteered, "The teacher likes the words, not the pictures, but I like the pictures."

When queried as to what he thought a good writer needed to be able to do well in order to write well, Greg replied, "The words. . . see they spelled right, draw good, and have the right spaces between the words." Other children considered reactive in the study also focused on the first phase of the writing process, the composing, and offered rationales that reflected the accidents of discourse, those elements criticized on their papers, such as spelling, handwriting, paper neatness, etc.

Although Greg, a reactive writer, shows little sensitivity to writing concepts, he did gain a greater sense of his own likes and dislikes about writing themes. In subsequent interviews Greg shared more about his own experiences which the teacher could suggest as writing topics. In each interview evidence was given by the child, which the interviewer, the teacher, could use to assist him to be more critical. The teacher, through the questions used in the interview, directed the child to think about his own work. The work was not being compared with other children's writing. Rather, the child, even in these very early stages of writing development and self-evaluation, is being aided to develop his own criteria.

The Reflective Child

An example of an interview with a child who exhibits behaviors consistent with the reflective writer can be seen in the following interview:

Researcher: Why did you pick this paper, "The Ant," as number one?

Lorna: Cuz I like poems and I liked this better than any other. I like the way the words go together.

Researcher: Would you choose your favorite line?

Lorna: "Some people think it is nothing at all."

Researcher: Why did you pick this as number two?

Lorna: I like drawing pictures of girls and gowns and things.

Researcher: Are there any here you would like to fix to make them better?

Lorna: No.

Researcher: How do you think a teacher decides which papers are the best?

Lorna: Well, on the poetry she looks over the sentences and then she decides on the way it sounds and the way the words are put together.

Researcher: Lorna, what does a good writer have to know or be able to do in order to write well?

Lorna: You have to first think ahead before you write.

Read the story after they write it to see if they make any mistakes. They should have a little play in there and if it is long they should have one or two days. If you run out of things to tell, start another day.

You should tell how a person feels if he is in the story.

You have to know how to spell. If you don't, look it up. If you can't find the dictionary ask for help. I usually ask Jody. Remember capital letters, periods, and if someone talks, use quotation marks.

Write neat so people could read it and leave spaces between the words.

Lorna's interview, as well as her functioning within the entire writing process, are very different from Greg's. Lorna has a strong sense of the ingredients involved in the actual process of writing, as well as audience sense. Further interviews with Lorna can focus

much more on style, a sense of what communicates with different audiences, as well as the development of a sense of authority with her writing voice.

The Writing Conference

The focal point for developing self-critical powers in the young writer is the writing conference. The conference, depending on the developmental level of the child, may be as often as every five days, or every ten days. The reactive writer needs more frequent interviews and is often helped best while he is actually engaged in the first two phases of the writing process. Sometimes the teacher may be able to be of assistance when the child has just finished writing, through questions and reactions during the third phase, postcomposing. Conferences usually do not last more than five to ten minutes and are easily scheduled when children are engaged in other self-directed activities.

How are writing conferences conducted with children? The teacher seeks to elicit information from children rather than in issuing directives about errors on their papers. This is done for two reasons. First, children need to hear themselves offering opinions. They gain a sense of voice by first hearing themselves express ideas and opinions orally. This is particularly true if the teacher is a good listener who actively enables children to express their thoughts. Secondly, the teacher needs to gain a sense of children's logical thinking and interests. This can only come from the words of the children. Greg's statement, "The teacher likes the words, not the pictures, but I like the pictures," provided valuable insights into Greg's composing priorities.

What factors in the writing process need to be considered during conferences with the young writer? The following are examples of questions and procedures used in child conferences:

Factor	Conference Procedure
Voice	"You seem to know a lot about fashion. How did you decide what outfit your doll would wear? . . . How was that made? I didn't know that you knew this much about clothes. Are there some clothes you especially like to wear for different times . . . like parties . . . going to school . . . to visit someone special?"
A Need for More Specifics	"What happened after the man won the race? Good. I would be interested in reading what happened."
	"You say he had an accident in the race. What happened to the car? What did the front fender and head light look like after it hit the guard rail? Here are some words you just used in telling me about the accident. Would you like to use them?"
	"I am going to close my eyes. Can you tell me some words that will help me get a picture of what that racing car looks like?"
Language and Organization	"Which word do you like best? Do you have some words here you have never used before?"
	"Is there a sentence here that seems to say what you wanted to say more than any other?"
	"Do you think this sentence ought to come after this one? Read it out loud and tell me what you think."
	"You have two thoughts in this sentence. Read it out loud and tell me where the first one ends."

Progress and Change	"Let's look in your folder here. Do you see any changes between this paper you wrote last December and the one you have just completed? Where do you feel you have improved? What are some of the things that haven't improved, yet you still wish they were better? Do you think your handwriting has improved?"
Audience Sense	"Which paper do you think is your best? I agree. Do you think it is good enough to go into the class collection? Do you want it to go there? Are there some things you would change in this paper, to make it your very best? Who are some of the people in this room who would be interested in reading this? Would you like to share it with them? Will they be able to read it?"

These questions will respond to a range of child differences to help both the reactive and reflective writer. The teacher will need to be sensitive to the degree of abstraction and amount of reflectiveness contained in each question, the children's interest in their own work, and sensitivity to their own changes as writers. The questions are intended to develop children's senses of authority and voice as well as to provide questions they will ask when writing alone.

When children are involved in individual conferences from the beginning, led to discover strengths and weaknesses in their own communication, it is not long before they begin to tell us what is needed to make their writing a stronger communication. When this point has been reached, we know the issue of dependency has been removed; indeed, the entire writing welfare issue has been put behind us. We know the writing process is where it belongs in the first place, in the hands of the child.

References

Graves, D. H. "Children's Writing: Research Directions and Hypotheses Based upon An Examination of the Writing Processes of Seven Year Old Children (Doctoral dissertation, SUNY at Buffalo, 1973). (University Microfilms No. 74-8375) (Also see the article, "An Examination of the Writing Processes of Seven Year Old Children," Research in the Teaching of English, 1975, 9, 227-41.)